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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000325

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [PHUM](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [FJ](#)
SUBJECT: FIJI COMMITS "IN PRINCIPLE" TO ELECTIONS BY MARCH
2009; DONOR CONSULTATIONS; ACTION REQUEST

REF: SUVA 313

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. (Sec. 1.4, B,D)

¶1. (C) Fiji interim prime minister Bainimarama announced on June 19 that the interim government is prepared to accept "in principle" that democratic elections "could be held" by March ¶2009. Bainimarama suggested that the onus is now on the donor community, especially Australia, New Zealand, the EU, and the U.S., to provide the assistance Fiji needs to achieve an election by that date. Bainimarama also asked the international community to help Fiji's economy recover, since a healthy economy would be required for elections to be possible. Interestingly, only two days earlier, on June 18, Bainimarama had held a press conference at which he said the interim government would move toward democratic elections on its own timetable, dependent on first achieving the "President's mandate" to transform Fiji's population into a multi-cultural, forward-leaning polity.

Comment

¶2. (C) A recent joint Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)-Fiji technical assessment team judged that Fiji could technically deliver free and fair elections using revised electoral boundaries from a new census by March 2009, and the election could take place even earlier, by November 2008, with donor assistance. It appears Bainimarama's "in principle" commitment now fudges the date to March 2009 if/if there is sufficient donor assistance. Many Fiji citizens and most members of the diplomatic corps remain skeptical of the interim government's intentions, noting the "in principle" language, and believing that the earlier press-conference statement accurately reflected Bainimarama's true sentiments. He has repeatedly indicated his conviction that any return to democracy before a seismic transformation of Fiji mindsets has occurred would be senseless. That transformation would take a very long time. Still, the interim government is desperate for donor aid, especially some US\$200 million in EU sugar assistance that is dependent on Fiji moving ahead rapidly on an elections timetable. The aim appears to be to play out an elections process, find ways to stretch it, and gain as much assistance as possible before eventually pleading one necessity or another to postpone an actual election date.

¶3. (C) Last week, prior to the expulsion of the New Zealand High Commissioner in Suva, the EU was ready to announce a first tranche of some US\$5 million in technical sugar assistance, based on the recent lifting of Fiji's formal state of emergency. Bainimarama's "in principle" approval of

the election timeframe will be further encouragement for the EU to release the initial funding. However, the EU's plan of action would not release the bulk of sugar assistance until after March 2009, seemingly keeping considerable pressure on the interim government to deliver the election before then.

Next steps?

14. (C) We discussed next steps with EU, UK, and Australian heads of mission today, all of whom are anxious for the U.S. to join in a commitment to provide assistance to move the technical processes of conducting a census and drawing electoral-boundaries ahead rapidly in a well-coordinated way under the auspices of the PIF working group process. UNFPA, which has been assisting Fiji's Bureau of Statistics to prepare for the census, wants to coordinate with other donors as well. We promised to consult with Washington, noting the expressed U.S. willingness to assist a legitimate effort to return Fiji to democracy at an early date, while also noting that the Washington bureaucratic process to release funding can be arduous. Diplomatic colleagues understood the point, but stressed that having the U.S. visibly on board a joint donor effort is important, even if U.S. funds take a while to arrive.

Action request

15. (C) While very skeptical of interim-government intentions, we see real merit in joining other donors to help fund the technical efforts to achieve a census and draw electoral-boundaries ASAP. It is important to force Bainimarama's hand on an election, and moving such technical exercises ahead rapidly is a sensible way to do that. We

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seek Washington advice on how the U.S. might best contribute financially to a joint-donor process. Please advise.
DINGER